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“Oh Take Some Man-up Pills”: A Life-History Study of Muscles, Masculinity, and the Threat of Injury

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Abstract

The current study explored the life-histories of 10 weight training men and aimed to understand the role muscularity played in their masculine identities. Additionally, the study sought to gain insight into the men's responses to experiences (e.g., injury) that threaten their muscular masculinity. Semi-structured interviews and life-history timelines allowed interviewees reflect on their muscular desires, their injury responses, and the influential experiences, people, and events that shaped their perceptions and identities. The current findings demonstrated how men's muscular desires were part of a socially shaped overarching masculine performance narrative, whereby muscularity played a central role as a form of aesthetic and instrumental bodily capital. The overarching narrative were blueprints for the men's identities, and at times of threat the men constructed different realignment narratives to help maintain and restore their masculine identities and performances. The current study demonstrated the influence social observations and interactions over the life course had on narrative and identity construction and the meanings attributed to muscularity. The findings inform research of the need to embrace multiple masculine narratives to understand the potentially diverse meanings muscularity holds for men in different social contexts.

1. Introduction

Many men desire an identity centred around muscularity and a body epitomised by well-muscled arms, stomach, and pectorals, wide shoulders, and a narrow waist (Beagan & Saunders, 2005; Grogan & Richards, 2002; Mishkind, Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1986; Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005). A muscular physique is a “primary sign of manhood” associated with male success, intimidation, and status (Morrison, Morrison, & Hopkins, 2003, p. 117). Existing qualitative research suggests a spectrum of socially acceptable and contextual muscular masculine physiques, ranging from a lean, athletic, physique to a hypermuscular body characterised by naturally unobtainable bulk and mass (Beagan & Saunders, 2005; Grogan & Richards, 2002; Klein, 1993; Monaghan, 2001). Regardless of the physique aspirations, many researchers use the concept of threatened masculinity to frame the drive for increased muscularity, which is fuelled by the reduced need for manual, industrial, labour and an inability for men to assert their dominant gender status (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014; Klein, 1993; Mishkind et al., 1986). As a result, men seemingly pursue muscular bodies to reinstate their identity status in a society that increasingly sees muscular masculinity as a product for consumption and an exchangeable physical attribute (Alexander, 2003; Gillet & White, 1992; Klein, 1993, 1995; Kotzé & Antonopoulos, 2019).

Muscular masculinity is a term used to describe the embodiment of a masculine identity that derives from the Schwarzenegger and Stallone era where muscles are “symbolic weaponry”, suggesting violence, stoicism, and control (Ellis, 2016, p. 88; Kotzé & Antonopoulos, 2019; Messner, 2007; Winlow, 2001). The concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1990) provides a theoretical lens to view muscularity’s role as an integral source of bodily (Wacquant, 2004; Winlow, 2001) and masculine capital (de Visser, Smith, & McDonnell, 2009; Edwards, Tod, & Molnar, 2017). Through this lens, men’s bodies serve as projects to work on and symbolise their male distinction, competency, and identity (Bridges, 2009; Brown, 1999; Gill, Henwood, & McLean; Klein, 1993). Accrued bodily, masculine, capital can be exchanged for power and social rewards, such as recognition, acceptance, and prestige (Bourdieu, 1986, 1990; de Visser et al., 2009; de Visser & McDonnell, 2013).

Muscularity offers both aesthetic and instrumental elements that help establish and enhance an identity through suggesting and acting out traditional masculine characteristics, such as violence,

force, and confrontation (Kotzé & Antonopoulos, 2019; Winlow, 2001). As well as proactive uses of muscularity, muscularity can also have compensatory and protective qualities, counteracting feelings of male insecurity, low self-esteem, and redeeming marginalised behaviours, such as homosexual tendencies and alcohol abstinence (de Visser et al., 2009; Edwards et al., 2017; Klein, 1993; Sparkes, Batey, & Brown, 2005). Existing research presents the derogatory, exclusionary, and abusive relationships that some men report with significant others, such as parents and romantic partners, that instil a sense of inadequacy, emasculation, and create conflicts in their masculine identities (Edwards et al., 2017; Sparkes et al., 2005). These relationships and other experiences, such as being short or injured, appear to stimulate a desire for increased muscularity, which helps resolve masculine conflicts, provides emotional support, and forms a “protective cocoon” that shields them from, and compensates for, masculine threats (Edwards et al., 2017; Sparkes et al., 2005 p.145; Young, White, & McTeer, 1994).

Modern society sees multiple masculinities emerging and the capital value of a muscular masculine physique seems to be context dependent and hold different meanings (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; de Visser et al., 2009). For example, muscularity may hold varying levels of aesthetic and instrumental values for individuals, which may be received and judged differently to those outside a given cultural field (de Visser et al., 2009; Monaghan, 1999; Kotzé & Antonopoulos, 2019). These contextual differences allude to the diversity of muscular and masculine meanings. Further investigation is needed to understand the symbolic role muscularity plays in the life-long construction of masculine identities and the resolution of identity threats. Additionally, we need to embrace the potential diversity in masculine expressions and the meanings of muscularity that may develop over time. Existing research tends to target specific muscular populations (e.g., bodybuilders) whose perceptions, motivations, and use of muscularity may differ from other men. This limited contextual focus may restrict our understanding of muscles and masculinity, leaving muscular research dominated by rigid traditional and culturally specific views of masculinity.

1.2 Research Questions

1. What roles does muscularity play in constructing masculine identities?
2. What influences and shapes a muscular-masculinity over the life-course?

3. What role does muscularity play in managing masculinity at times of threat (e.g., injury)?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Ten white, weight training males, participated in the current study (see table 1. for demographics). All 10 men weight trained at least 4-times per week, used legal supplementation, and demonstrated a clear investment in muscularity.

2.2 Recruitment

The men were recruited via an injury clinic and expressed that injury had threatened their masculine identities. The first author's role as the men's sports therapist upheld the professional codes of trust, confidentiality, and respect; creating a good rapport and integrity between the researcher and the prospective participants, which is beneficial when engaging in rich life-history research and sensitive research topics (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2006). The men were not invited to partake in the study until treatment, rehabilitation, and any conflicting relationships had expired. An institutional research ethics committee provided clearance for the study and the men provided informed consent to participate before data collection commenced.

2.3 Procedure and Data Collection

Life-history methodologies capture individuals' inner experiences in relation to ever-changing life events (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Knowing how muscularity concerns and desires develop and influence life is necessary to identify developmental patterns and minimise dysfunction (Ricks, 1974). The life-history data came from a series of one-to-one, semi-structured, interviews, ranging between 45 and 120 minutes, with the locations and times chosen by the participants. Similar transcripts and investigations (e.g., Edwards et al., 2017; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2006) informed the interview process and allowed a sensitisation to the potential topics, issues, and considerations.

Initially one open-ended question was asked – tell me a little about your injury experience? – which stimulated discussions around the men's emotional and behavioural responses as well as the impact on their identities. Active listening and a flexible structure allow for breadth and depth of qualitative insight, participant control, and unpredicted topics to emerge (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2006, 2010). Including a life-history timeline encouraged the recollection of life experiences and

influential events; creating a backdrop for the participants' narratives (Edwards et al., 2017). When given the timeline the men were asked a 'grand tour' question (Wolcott, 1994) and encouraged to provide accounts of their lives and share any key events, people, and influences. Creating a rich portrayal of experiences helped achieve a greater understanding of the social environments and experiences that shaped the muscular desires and responses to potential identity conflicts.

All participants had additional interviews, which expanded on their previous responses, allowed additional rich data to be collected, and an opportunity for member reflection to comment on transcripts and interpretations. Reflecting on the interviews with other researchers allowed us to debrief, identify, and make sense of any initial interpretations and assumptions, as well as assess the interviewer's role in the interview process, which informed future interactions.

2.4 Data Analysis

Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim using pseudonyms to protect the participants' identities. The initial analysis involved narrative indwelling, which consisted of an immersion in the transcripts; reading them several times, listening to audio recordings, and making preliminary notes about initial impressions (Smith, 2016; Allan, Smith, Côté, Martin Ginis, Latimer-Cheung, 2018). The current study conducted a dual-narrative analysis that involved both thematic and holistic-form structural analyses (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber., 1998; Perrier, Strachan, Smith, & Latimer-Cheung, 2014).

Thematic narrative analysis enabled the identification of the central themes and patterns that underpinned the men's stories and captured "what" symbolic role muscularity played in their lives. Analysing the thematic content identified key sentences, words, and phrases (Reissman, 2008; Smith, 2016). To aid theme identification, questions were asked of the data, such as "what are the common themes or threads in each story?" (Smith, 2016, p. 264) and "what is the relationship between emerging themes?" The selected content helped summarise semantic (apparent) and latent (underlying) meanings (Smith, 2016). Generating the themes used a hybrid approach that drew on both inductive and deductive approaches, which reflected a two-way interaction that moved between the data and theory and vice versa (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

An analytical bracketing technique allowed for a shift in orientation between the what's (e.g., content) and the how's (e.g., structure) of each participant's story (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Bracketing the thematic analysis and narrative content allowed a focus on how and why the current men structured their narratives in the way they did. The holistic-form structural narrative analysis focused on plot organisation and narrative resources and types (Allan et al., 2018; Lieblich et al., 1998; Smith, 2016; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). The structural analysis involved questioning "what was the desired outcome of the men's stories?", "where did their stories originate?" and "what strategies did they employ to achieve their desired narrative outcome?" Asking these questions identified the inspirations, directions, and benefits of the men stories as well as the behaviours, emotions, and perspectives guided by them (Smith & Sparkes, 2005; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Analysing and bracketing the life-history content and structural narrative plots created a temporal context to the responses, facilitated a more profound understanding of the meanings of a muscular physique, and identified the strategies employed to maintain their desired image at times of threat (e.g., injury).

2.5 Research Credibility

A non-foundational approach to research credibility was adopted, which offered suitable criteria to evaluate and guide the research design (Smith & Caddick, 2012). Table 2. presents the criteria and how these were met to ensure data integrity.

3. Findings and Discussion

The following section combines the key narrative features with a discussion of theoretical concepts and existing muscularity and masculinity literature to clearly demonstrate our interpretations of the men's stories, which generates a clear understanding of how theoretical interpretations relate to the participants' stories (Papathomas & Lavalley 2014).

Firstly, we summarise the "make-up" and symbolic meanings of muscularity within a dominant masculine narrative before discussing the structural plot and influential experiences that coherently tied the men's experiences and muscular desires together. Secondly, we describe the key features and the temporal structure of the 3 realignment narratives that demonstrated the responses to the identity threat and narrative wreckage caused by injury.

3.1 *“It’s All About Being a Man”; Performing Muscular Masculinity*

The men’s stories of muscular masculinity reflected a performance narrative, which is characterised by a self-oriented focus on competing, winning, and gaining social status and esteem in a sporting context (Douglas & Carless, 2006). Winning is a central facet of a sporting storyline that can enhance one’s masculine identity (Dowling Næss, 2001). The current men’s narratives, however, did not focus their muscular desires towards sporting success. Instead, they expressed a global masculine performance, which provided a global sense of achievement and status, as Matt described: “[I] train to get bigger...if I look good [muscular] then...[I] feel like as a man I’m achieving something”.

Similarly, a muscular physique represented a favoured, superior, position in the masculine hierarchy (Beagan & Saunders, 2005; Klein, 1993; Kimmel, 1999; Sabo, 2000), as Sean discussed:

Muscle represents that alpha male, masculinity, power that I want everyone to see in me...I think it is that competitive edge [over other men]... just constantly wanting to prove yourself or be the best.

The current men’s expression of muscular masculinity echo the existing proposals that men’s bodies are social projects, with a muscular, mesomorphic, shape being symbolic of cultural notions of masculinity; representing strength, power, confidence, bravery, and control (Beagan & Saunders, 2005; Grogan, 2008; Klein, 1993; Morrison et al., 2003; Dowling Næss, 2001; Shilling, 2013). The current research tends to focus on the visually muscular and mesomorphic “shape” as an emblem of masculinity (Beagan & Saunders, 2005; Grogan, 2008; Klein, 1993, 1995), which was echoed by Dale; “Obviously, big, lean, big. [Makes you] yeah just more like imposing I suppose...It’s all about being a man. The biggest man...a real man”. This aesthetic value of muscularity reflects the shift in society that sees the male body more as a commodity that holds value in itself and serves to be consumed and enjoyed by oneself and others (Alexander, 2003; Kotzé & Antonopoulos, 2019).

Some men, however, placed less primary focus on superficial image and emphasised the instrumental and functional facets of muscularity within their masculinity. This functional emphasis reflects the more historical connotations of a masculine body (e.g., physical labour and capabilities; Andreasson & Johnsson, 2014; Klein, 1995). Industrialisation rendered physical strength and manual

work as obsolete leaving visual muscularity more valuable in representing a masculine identity (Klein, 1993, 1995). Andy, however, demonstrated that function is still a key masculine resource that accompanies muscular aesthetics:

Now, [muscle] size yeah it's a massive thing... [but] it has got to be functional you know... You know as a man, you have got to be fit... If you can get about [referring to fitness and functionality], you've got that presence and that size, but also that physicality [strength and power] then you know don't sort of fear nobody really.

Despite Andy, emphasising functional muscularity, he still feels the need to use his visual physique as a vehicle to advertise his instrumental capabilities. With masculine instrumentality being less prominent in modern society, Andy's muscularity displays the potential for strength and physical capabilities. This finding reflects the notion of firm and hardened bodies being a valuable masculine asset and form of bodily capital that can symbolise desired instrumental aspects of masculinity and exchanged for reward in given social contexts, such as Andy's sport (Kotzé & Antonopoulos, 2019; Winlow, 2001).

The presence of different muscular emphases (e.g., aesthetics and functionality) in the current study suggests that muscular desires are deeper and more diverse than existing research may insinuate. The men's performance narratives appeared to originate from the early observation and interactions with male family members, following a plotline of observation, construction, and enactment.

3.2 Observing a Man; Setting the Masculine Tone

The men's early observations created identity 'blueprints' and laid the foundations for masculine ideals. For some, muscularity was introduced as a valuable aesthetic resource early in their lives, such as Josh's idolisation of his brother:

Growing up around my brother and seeing somebody who was like an alpha male almost, you know he is a big bloke. So that's kind of what I always wanted to be... My brother has always been central to this [masculinity], at 8 years my senior and naturally bigger [more muscular] I had always seen my big brother as the epitome of masculinity.

A comparison with bigger and more muscular siblings sells muscularity and physical size as defining features of a successful and respected masculine body (Sparkes et al., 2005). Some of the current men, however, were not initially exposed to a muscular stature, but instead recalled other more instrumental masculine characteristics, such as hard work, commitment, and sacrifice that formed the basis of their masculine performances, as Andy described:

Dad was a key role... Set the tone yeah...He grafts sort of 12, 13, 14-hour days... he has always been a hard worker and stuff like that makes you want to push harder... He's probably sacrificed a lot in the past...dedicating his time [to me]...You know, that's the tone, and that's how it is. It is all I have ever known.

Like existing research, the current study suggests masculine identities are actively produced through social interactions and drawing on available resources, such as the attitudes, appearance, and behaviours the current men observed in their fathers and male siblings (Dowling Næss, 2001; Mormon & Floyd, 2006; Mussen & Distler, 1959; Sparkes et al., 2005). The impact of the social messages on the men's identities reflect Bourdieu's (1986a) concept of habitus (dispositions or schemes of perception that inform socially "meaningful practices"; Bourdieu, 1986 p.170), which guided their future masculine practices (e.g., the participation in sport and weight training) and the masculine elements they valued (e.g., aesthetics and functionality). The meaningful masculine elements taken from observations in the current study represented varying emphasis on the two dimensions of bodily capital proposed by Kotzé & Antonopoulos (2019); aesthetic and instrumental (functional) resources. These resources "set a tone" and provided attainable and exchangeable assets for the men's developing masculine identities.

3.3 Constructing a Man; Embodying Muscular Masculinity

The current men's decisions to engage in sport and weight training was guided by a desire to emulate their male role models masculine identities, which echoes Messner (1990a p. 438):

"Boys do not come to their first experiences in organised sport as 'blank slates' but arrive with already 'gendering' identities due to early developmental experiences and previous socialisation."

Sport further shapes the perception of what it means to be male and promotes specific values, such as strength, competitiveness, success, and hard work (Messner, 1990b, 1992). The current men demonstrated an amalgamation of the social resources they had available to them (e.g., early observations) and the sporting values they learned, as Andy demonstrated:

[In rugby] you have got to commit yourself, you got to have hard work, you have got to make sure you are dedicated to it. So yeah, all three aspects [from my dad] tie into that...[he] worked hard in what he does, made me want to work harder on the rugby field. Made me want to train harder in the gym and made me want to put the hours in you know like he does.

Sport and weight training also reinforced and infused aesthetic muscularity and “looking good” into the men’s masculine constructions, which echoes the ascription of masculine meaning to hypermuscular physiques in the bodybuilding literature (Brown, 1999; Jefferson, 1998; Klein, 1993; Monaghan, 2002), as Dale demonstrated:

It’s [muscularity] like everywhere in the gym isn’t it... Everyone who looks good now looks big...[In the gym] there’s like a group of lads that are bigger and leaner and everyone always looks up to them...it [muscularity] becomes in there then doesn’t it [pointing to his head]...you’re always aiming to be like that...it’s more of an ego man thing that you want to be the biggest.

As well as an aesthetic resource, using the body as strong and functional machine was also engrained into some men’s masculine constructions, performances, and sense of identity (Messner, 1990b; Ricciardelli, McCabe, & Ridge, 2006), as Andy explained:

You know coaches, senior people bang on about physicality [muscular function] and also having that manly presence [muscular physique]...being in that environment...modelling on other players wa’ a massive thing...That’s where the mindset of wanting to be bigger *and* stronger sort of came from...I have built myself [to be] functional...Mine [physique] is all down to athletic, athletic look never wanna look like any bodybuilder. Never wanna be the biggest just want to feel that I’m fit, I’m functional, I’ve also got the power there

The accumulation of muscularity as a symbolic resource reflected Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of cultural capital, and specifically a form of bodily, masculine, capital (de Visser et al., 2009; Kotzé &

Antonopoulos, 2019; Wacquant, 2004). Aesthetic and instrumental bodily capital hold high value and enhance “the ability to look, act, and be” ‘hard’” or in the current study to look, act, and be a man (Kotzé & Antonopoulos, 2019, p. 11). The current men emphasise differing values on aesthetics and instrumentality, with some perceiving a consumable muscular body as a masculine entity to enjoy in itself and others seeking to display the masculine potential and physical attributes symbolised by a muscular body. For all the current men, however, developing muscularity represented a form of control and means of constructing and maintaining a desired masculinity in a society where men’s opportunities to display traditional male roles (e.g., hard labour, like Andy’s dad) are diminishing (Alexander, 2003; Kotzé & Antonopoulos, 2019). Possessing more capital led to the perception of higher status, and a belief that “more muscle means more masculine” (Beagan & Saunders, 2005, p. 163; de Visser et al., 2009), as Dale alluded to:

You want to go a bit more, then a bit more, and you always like. You’re never satisfied...

You always want to be bigger [more muscular], maybe there’s a bit of, yeah, manly

status...yeah [you] always want to be top dog all the time I suppose...I suppose it is a respect thing...the more muscular you are the more you are respected.

The men’s early observations and social interactions within sport and weight training promoted the body as a site of social communication, reinforced muscle’s capital value, and shaped the construction and performance of their muscular masculinity (Brown, 1999; Dowling Næss, 2001; Messner, 1990b, 1992; Monaghan, 2002).

3.4 Enacting a Man; Performing Muscular Masculinity

Bodies are a “means for self-expression, for becoming who we would most like to be” (Giddens, 1991 p. 2) and a muscular body underpinned the current men’s masculine identity performances. Bodybuilding and a devotion to increasing strength embodies the masculine stereotype and represents an active opportunity to achieve a coherent narrative self-identity (Fox, 1998; Monaghan, 2002; Mosse, 1996). Similarly, the act of weight training became an essential practice for all the current men and reflected their desire to accrue bodily masculine capital and bolster their masculine identity performances (Jefferson, 1998). The men worked on their bodies as projects

through weight training and built “something of value” that was etched with a statement of masculinity (Wagner, 2016, 2017, p. 583), as Sean described:

[without my muscularity] I think people would just think I am just a normal bloke...[big, muscular, men] are just like big enforcers type thing...I quite like the fact that when I walk into a room just the way I look or the way I hold myself people think “I wouldn’t f*** with him”. I often think that is what the gym gives me, is that ability to put [muscular] size on...and people are just like “f*** me”...muscle makes me someone that people will take notice of.

Sean captures the aesthetic element of bodily capital, and the way his muscular masculinity is something for other’s consumption and to “take notice of” (Kotzé & Antonopoulos, 2019). He also alludes to muscularity’s instrumental utility, that conveys hardness and someone not to be confronted. Similarly, Josh explained how his muscularity provided a “power” and confidence in his physical capabilities to look after himself:

Our views of dominance, success and being that masculine man are being big, powerful, and being able to physically dominate... a situation where there is somebody who is trying to exert power...[I know] I could still kick the f*** out of him...it’s nice to have that, that you almost, that you kind of have that in your locker... you have that affirmation through being muscular that yeah I can, I can hold my own... I quite like having my kind of power.

Like existing research, some of the men’s muscularity is symbolic weaponry that conveys the potential for violence and physical force, rendering actual action unnecessary, which emboldens their masculine performances (Ellis, 2016, p. 88; Kotzé & Antonopoulos, 2019; Winlow, 2001). The current findings also suggest that muscularity can advertise instrumental attributes, other than violence, within masculine performances, as Andy stated: “[muscularity] shows I have got some determination in there, I have got that desire to want to push on in life, like my dad.” Similarly, Malcom expressed how his body conveyed certain beneficial characteristics and “presence”:

[As a man] your presence has to be felt without you saying or doing anything. And a lot of that can come through with how you present yourself...I think physique has a lot to do with

that... I can introduce myself in a kind of powerful fashion, a confidence from the whole physique.

The investment in a single performance narrative, such as masculinity, has the potential to become problematic when experiences and practices no longer fit this narrative type (Frank, 1995; Smith & Sparkes, 2005). In the current study, a disruptive event (e.g., injury) was incompatible with the structure and intent of the dominant masculine performance narrative; to be a muscular, strong, and capable man. The incompatibility between injury and the men's masculine performance narrative reflected what Frank (1995) termed narrative wreckage; posing a threat to their sense of self and masculine identities (McAdams, 1993; McLeod, 1997). Injury, specifically, has ramifications for masculinity; resulting in a loss of muscle mass and power, and evoking a sense of inadequacy and inferiority (Sparkes et al., 2005; Young et al., 1994, White, Young, & McTeer, 1995; Young & White, 2000).

In response to the potential narrative wreckage, the current men expressed three different narratives. These narratives aimed to achieve some restoration and maintenance of their desired overarching masculine performance narratives by controlling their bodily masculine capital, which inspired the term *realignment narratives*. Like their overarching performance narrative, the realignment narratives (*reliance*, *redemption*, and *relapse*) were shaped by social observations and interactions and demonstrated different responses to the injury threats.

3.5 Realignment Narratives; Three "R's" of Maintaining Masculine Performance

3.5.1 Reliance Narratives

Six men expressed a reliance narrative that demonstrated a narrow adherence to, and reliance on, the hegemonic aesthetic and instrumental traits (e.g., muscular stature and stoicism) engrained in their performance narratives by their role models and social fields (Gerschick & Miller, 1994). The reliance narrative reflected elements of a stability genre; an unchanged trajectory of experiences and identity (Gergen & Gergen, 1986). By adopting this reliance narrative, the men were able to minimise alterations to their identities and prevent any diversion from their overall performance narrative. The plotline that underpinned this narrative was *rejection*, *adherence*, and *preservation*.

The initial threat injury posed to the men's masculine performances was related to their muscularity (and the act of building it) and symbolic role as capital. The men appeared to prospectively discuss the threat of injury and the potential losses despite the injury being in the past. As Sean described; "if I don't do it [keep training], I won't gain anything. I won't keep my size and strength; I won't be better than the next person." This future perspective suggested that these men refused to accept the injury, which extinguished its threats, as Jack stated: "I just put it out of my mind and got on with it"

The acceptance and display of injury and pain is traditionally seen as non-masculine (Courtenay, 2000; Spencer, 2012; Young et al, 1994). Enduring injury, suffering, and not seeking help, as demonstrated in the reliance narrative, are marks of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005; Courtenay, 2000; Young et al., 1994; O'Brien, Hunt, & Hart, 2005), as Malcom described:

It [the injury] got to a point where it was getting worse rather than better. But you know, you don't really want to ask for help do you...I think that's, yeah there's something, definitely some element of er, er alpha male type you know...you just kind of battle through it.

The rejection of injury meant these men continue their normal practices (e.g., weight training and sport) because not adhering to these was not a viable choice within their masculine performance, as Jack stated; "I was never going to not train...it just wasn't an option". Aesthetic were vital, as capital, for these men, as a masculine image was important to them. By not training they would lose aesthetic bodily capital, jeopardising their masculine respect and status, as Sean explained:

Everybody would go "oh you're mad just rest, you're mad just rest" but you'd be stupid just resting... if I don't do weights I will lose all this size...I just feel like people just lose respect for you really...That's my biggest worry though, is that people will forget I am this big manly rugby player...That's like my identity.

Maintaining aesthetic capital subsequently had instrumental utility and displayed dedication, strength, and lack of vulnerability that epitomised their identity (Courtenay, 2000; Gill et al., 2005), as Sean further explains:

[when injured] I would still be doing something training wise...I kind of like getting that

[masculine] tag because people, I thought in my head, people would think like "he is injured

but he is still training”...“bloody hell he needs to stop and he just doesn’t give up”...It wasn’t like, I wouldn’t have said it was just like an image, I would have said it was more like a, you know it’s just who I am.

Identifying key lived experiences and observations helped understand how a reinforcement of aesthetics and subsequent instrumental benefits informed the men’s masculine constructions and responses to identity threats. For example, Sean recalled how his dad’s physical stature influenced the importance of a aesthetic capital, which underpinned the observed instrumental qualities:

I always looked at my dad and always thought he was always like bigger than everybody else’s dad... Like he was big, but he was just like a proper man you know... he had this “never say die” attitude...I remember just feeling his chest and feeling the scars [after heart surgery]...he went through all that pain just to be with us...And I always just thought, like I want to be thought of like that...this is where my work ethic came from I think. I wanted to put myself through pain [referring weight training and rugby] to prove I could take it.

The gym and sporting environments also reinforced visual muscularity, and the process of building it, as a ways “doing” masculinity (Maguire, 1993; Spencer, 2012). Failure to comply, results in stigmatisation (Young et al., 1994), which influenced these men’s reliance narrative, aspiration for aesthetic capital, and their decisions to continue training, as Jack discussed:

When you’re injured they [gym peers] constantly criticise your physique...like “oh, look at his arms, you been training in the ladies [female only gym room]?”...that would definitely piss me off a lot more because you [peers] don’t need to point out the fact that they [arms] look small [lacking muscle] when I can’t do anything about it with rehab...it does make me train harder though, want to prove them wrong a bit I guess...[I couldn’t] just do the little sh*tty [rehabilitative] exercises...I couldn’t stop [normal weight] training...I didn’t like to see my body getting smaller, I wasn’t going to let being injured stop me training.

By not succumbing to injury and continuing to build their aesthetic bodily capital, the men could maintain their highly valued visual masculine image and project the instrumental masculine traits they valued, such as stoicism, pain suppression, and resilience (Cheng, 1999; Courtenay, 2000; Kotzé & Antonopoulos, 2019; Young et al., 1994). These findings suggest that some men through their lived

experiences and social interactions adopt a restricted, narrow, masculine performance, which could encourage potentially detrimental or harmful behaviours (e.g., training through injury) when faced with identity conflicts or threats. Specifically, the reinforced primary value of muscularity as an aesthetic “tool for success” may encourage men to “abuse” themselves, such as overlooking pain and injury with the aim of maintaining a sense of masculine pride, success, and identity (Dowling Næss, 2001; Young & White, 2000).

3.5.1 Redemption Narratives

Two individuals constructed a redemption realignment narrative. The redemption genre originated from McAdams and McClean (2013) who proposed that individuals may shape narratives that allow opportunities for positive outcomes from initially negative events. The plotline of the redemption narrative mirrored a progressive plot (bad to good; Gergen and Gergen 1986). These men negatively appraised their injuries but engaged in adaptive behaviours to turn their situation into a positive experience and outcome. The plotline for the redemption narrative was *acceptance*, *adaptation*, and *restoration*.

Like the reliance narratives, injury threatened their bodily masculine capital, which endangered the men’s overall masculine performance. Unlike the reliance narratives, however, these men described their loss of muscularity and sense-of-self in the past tense, which suggested a realisation and acceptance of injury, as Andy described:

Lost a lot of size...Muscle mass decreased quite a lot...You train so hard to make yourself have a physical presence and to be a big strong man...to being sat down doing nothing and just sat there feeling, you know helpless, and nothing you can do...[I was] going down that road of feeling depressed, because I just wanted to get back in the gym and just wanted to get back on with my training.

Traditionally, accepting injury, removing oneself from the normal social environment, and seeking help poses a risk of being stigmatised as less masculine, or a “pussy” (Young et al., 1994 p. 181). Within the redemption narrative, however, these men could accept injury, as Dennis described; “It was just bad luck, it just, it happened and I had to sort of accept it, I just wanted to focus on getting better”. This acceptance was acceptable because these individuals placed more emphasis on the

instrumental and functional value of muscularity, and rehabilitation was a positive adaptive behaviour that still allowed them to build and maintain instrumental capital (e.g., strength and control), as Andy stated:

I never saw it [rehabilitation] as a negative thing...I could build on what I'd lost [muscular function] to start with...get functional movements back again...get everything [muscles] firing back up again...after I felt really good and felt more strong...I could regain [bodily] control.

The redemption narrative was similar to a quest narrative in that both men focused on controlling the present, met their injuries head on, and sought alternative ways (e.g., rehabilitation) to realign with their masculine performance narrative (Frank, 1995; Smith & Sparkes 2005), as Dennis explained:

I concentrated on doing the [rehab] exercises properly, doing them regularly and that sort of then became training...it would help the muscles get stronger and get better so I'd be able to get back to normal...The way I was training more shifted...a different style but yeah, I could still work just as hard, but it [training] was different...it's [rehab] kind of like a challenge to get better at it and get sort of stronger at that particular exercise... I like doing, like challenging myself.

Constructing a redemption narrative was facilitated by a compatibility between the men's early masculine habitus (e.g., observations of male role models; Bourdieu, 1986a) and their social environment and interactions. For example, both men's initial observations of masculinity emphasised instrumental masculinity rather than a visual image alone, as Andy described; "he [dad] is not big. But yeah...he grafts...you've got to work [hard]". He also explained how through rehabilitation he adopted the "don't lay down and die attitude [that] he [his dad] had" and how regaining muscular strength symbolised desired instrumental traits: "working at rehab and getting my strength back shows that I have got some graft in me."

The men's sport and gym environments also normalised the injury rehabilitation process and realigned the men's experiences with their overarching narrative by attributing muscular function to valued instrumental characteristics (e.g. hard work, challenge, and determination). Specifically, the encouragement of targets associated with regaining muscular function as a form of capital, gave the

men something to aim and work hard for, a sense of focus and achievement, which were important attributes associated with the men's muscular masculine identities. Athletes often learn to normalise pain and injury as part of the sporting experience (Howe, 2001; White et al., 1995), but as previous shown in the reliance narrative not all athletes will respond with injury acceptance. The supportive social environment allowed a commitment to the redemption narrative, acceptance, and adaptation to restore masculine performances:

You learn that it's [injury] part of the game...I was in the right atmosphere. I had the right physio for me...They knew I just wanted to get my strength back, get back to functioning properly...I'd set myself, with my physio, some targets and some goals and I knew I had something to aim for, something to work hard for...which made me think "oh I have done that"..."I've managed to perform a deadlift. I've managed to squat"...You know, and I felt much better, more like myself.

The redemption narrative suggests that some men will construct a quest-like plot, one that allows them to meet an identity-threat (such as injury) head on and adapt their behaviours in a way that aligns with, and restores, their dominant identity performance. Redemption reflects a positive, less restrictive, and more flexible response to masculine identity threats. Additionally, the redemption response demonstrated elements of inclusive or hybrid masculinity (Anderson, 2005; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) and emphasised muscularity's role as instrumental capital, which allowed the current men to reject some traditional features of a hegemonic masculine identity (e.g., a denial of pain and injury) and remove themselves from normal practices (e.g., weight training) whilst still maintaining their sense of masculinity through displaying other valuable traits, such as hard work and dedication.

3.5.3 Relapse Narratives

Two men demonstrated *relapse* narratives, which represented a fluctuation in responses: redemption to reliance. The relapse plot shared elements of a contamination narrative; the disruption of a positive event by negative experiences or affect (McAdams & McLean, 2013). For the current men, their relapse narratives presented an initial appreciation of, and engagement in, rehabilitation and an acceptance of injury. This initial response, however, became overwhelmed by negative social interactions and emasculation. This interference stimulated unfavourable emotions, contaminated their

initial narrative trajectory, and altered their attitudes and behaviours to suit their cultural surroundings. The fluctuation suggested a narrative instability, which was notably influenced by the social environment. The plotline for the relapse narratives followed a pattern of *appreciation*, *disruption*, and *reversion*.

Like the reliance narrative, losing aesthetic muscularity (capital) was at the forefront of the men's concerns about the threat injury posed to their masculine performances. Existing research suggests that retirement from sport creates a shift in female athletes' bodies from a muscular athletic ideal, which appeared to stimulate some increased body dissatisfaction (Papathomas, Petrie, & Plateau, 2018). The dissatisfaction arose from an increased body fat and reduced muscle mass, which shifted their bodies away from both the athletic ideals (Papathomas et al., 2018). Similarly, in the current men injury stimulated a loss of aesthetic capital (Kotzé & Antonopoulos, 2019) shifting them away from their muscular masculine ideals, as Dale described:

Like couple of days, or a couple of weeks without training you start... You feel like you're going to lose your size [muscularity]...when you lose that muscle, you've got nothing to show for it [masculinity], because the muscle mass is pay off for all the hard work that you do [in the gym]...It's a fear, yeah fear of losing... Because you're losing size, people might lose a little bit of respect for you because you've weakened, or you've shown weakness....

In the relapse narrative there was an initial engagement in rehabilitation, but there was little acceptance of injury or a controlling of the present like the redemption narrative. The relapse narrative focused on the future and appreciated that rehabilitation could get their normal masculinity back, as Darren demonstrated:

I think it's [engaging in rehabilitation] just purely wanting to get back playing as quick as possible...Try and gain that masculinity back, stuff you haven't been able to do for a few months [e.g., normal weight training].

Both men expressed a need to "try and cut corners" (Darren) and prematurely returning to their normal activities as way of realigning with their masculine performances. Their eagerness to return seemed to be driven by the value placed on building aesthetic bodily capital, as Dale reflected:

I left it 2 days without doing any [training]...then started doing band stuff [rehabilitation exercises]...but I just couldn't leave it [weight training]... The weights take over...I end up having to try find a way around it [rehabilitation]. Erm, I probably rush back [to training] or try and block it out or, yeah pain killers, or whatever to try and work around it to keep going [with training]. So yeah. It almost, yeah, fuelling that, almost masculine identity...this big, lean, masculine look.

Gym interactions guided the decision to stop rehabilitation and return to weight training by reinforcing weight training as a valued behaviour and exposing them to emasculating exchanges. These interactions generated a disruption to their realignment narrative, initiated self-evaluation, and questioned their masculine status, as Darren alluded to:

You see everyone doing what they're able to do normally and your kind of lying down on a mat doing, feels like nothing really. Yeah you just feel like you're, you've gone back to the bottom of the pile you can't do anything... You don't want to be just constantly stretching on a mat. Beggsy seen me on a mat last year...He would come in there and I would just be laid down on a mat. He would come over; "you are not doing anything again. Are you having a nap?" So, it's Beggs' fault, pushing me to get off the mat and get back doing stuff [weight training] again.

Similarly, Dale shares the specific emasculating effect of his gym peers that reinforced continuing weight training as a symbolic representation of masculinity (e.g., "sucking it up"; Fenton & Pitter, 2010; Howe, 2001; Hughes & Coakley, 1991).

They're [gym peers] chirping in your ear, and [when] they're about then you are less likely to do it [rehabilitation]...Like when you're in the gym or, and you're feeling a little a niggle and you happen to mention your injury. The lads'll take the piss... Or [you say] I think I've hurt something and got a niggle. They'll just [say] "oh take some man up pills and get on with it. Stop being a pussy. Just deal with it and get on with it". And it's another man thing as well, you don't moan about it or show weakness, you just suck it up and get on with it don't you...man up, take some man up pills.

By engaging in normal training behaviours or maintaining their aesthetic and instrumental capital, these men could not realign with their masculine performances. The masculine image and attributes symbolised by their muscularity and weight training (e.g., not showing weakness) was, like previous narratives, shaped by the men's life-history and male role models, as Dale reflected on:

Me dad wasn't a gym goer, but he was a big guy...a big man's man...me dad never stopped...he didn't stop working, he didn't show weakness. You know me dad never complained. Never saw me old man cry or owt like that...if something happened you just dealt with it...so for me, even now it's about just constant working, never rest...like if you injured you try deal with it and just power through [continue training]...you know it's probably not good [stopping rehabilitation], but you can't just stop [normal activities].

The disruptions these men experienced led them to revert to their default behaviours to maintain their bodily, masculine, capital and realign with their masculine performances in a way that was acceptable in their social environments, by "manning up" and returning to weight training.

The relapse response clearly demonstrated the power social interactions and cultural "pulls" have in changing the course of narratives and the symbolic value of bodily capital. The inability to commit to a temporarily altered masculine performance (e.g., rehabilitation) suggested an overwhelming sense of conflict between personal beliefs and social image. For example, the current men held a view that rehabilitation was a valuable activity in getting them back to normality, but this was conflicted and overpowered by the sociocultural emphasis and endorsement of a traditionally masculine performance symbolised by aesthetic stature and stoicism.

4. Conclusions

The current findings suggest that some men's muscular desires are driven by a masculine performance narrative that helped coherently navigate several social contexts. A global masculine performance narrative appeared to subsequently guide realignment narratives that addressed any masculine threats, such as injury. Existent masculinity literature discusses threatened masculinity and the identity crises associated with a loss of manual labour and gender equality (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014; Mishkind et al., 1986) and the subsequent shift of masculinity from something produced to something consumed, hence the increased desire for visually muscular physiques

(Alexander, 2003; Kotzé & Antonopoulos, 2019). It would seem men in modern, post-industrial, society are still experiencing threats to their masculine performances, and actively required to build and exchange their muscularity as forms of aesthetic and instrumental bodily capital to fulfil and maintain their identities. Building and possessing muscularity, in the current study, was a fundamental resource that provided multiple aesthetic and instrumental meanings within the masculinity-focused narratives that allowed the construction, enactment, and protection of the men's identities. The current findings contribute to the existing literature in the following ways.

Firstly, the proposal of masculine performance narratives as a contextual backdrop for men's muscular desires is a novel finding that advances our understanding of the muscle-masculinity relationship. Performance narratives have predominantly framed the significant pressures within sport and academia to monitor and control various aspects of life and achieve success and desired identities (Douglas & Carless, 2006, 2009; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014). Some researchers have also identified performance narratives in the realm of eating disorders, whereby individuals view self-starvation as a means of accomplishment when sporting and academic contexts may not allow for success (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014). The novel masculine performance narrative in the current study suggests that men put themselves under pressure to comply with socially shaped masculinities and follow a masculine blueprint that frames muscularity as a vehicle to success.

Secondly, the current study suggests that men may construct realignment narratives in response to threats to an overarching performance narrative and their masculine identities. Existing research has suggested counter-narratives as providing alternative ways of being and rejecting dominant narratives, which gives a sense of definitiveness (Baldwin, 2005; Bamberg, 2004; Carless, 2008). The proposal of realignment narratives adds to existing body image research and may provide insight into the different meanings behind decisions to engage in unhealthy or risky behaviours (e.g., self-starvation, excessive exercise) as ways of maintaining, rather than rejecting, narrative identities (e.g., as successful athletes; Busanich, McGannon, & Schinke 2012; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2012).

The realignment narratives were informed by, and dependent, on different social contexts and the interactions, norms, and expectations within them, which reinforces the malleability and interchangeability of narratives (Papathomas, 2016). Narratives provide resources to facilitate the

construction, revision, and reconstruction of identities in different social contexts (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Future studies can build on the current findings and explore how other individuals story their muscular desires and identity performances in multiple social contexts that expose them to varying interactions and expectations.

Thirdly, although framing muscularity as masculine or bodily capital is not novel (de Visser et al., 2009; de Visser & McDonnell, 2013; Edwards et al., 2017; Edmonds, 2018), the current study builds on the idea that muscularity serves two roles as capital; aesthetic and instrumental (Kotzé & Antonopoulos, 2019). The aesthetic element is prominent in existing research shown to supplement a masculine image or compensate for feminine or marginalised behaviours (Anderson, 2002; de Visser et al., 2009; Edwards et al., 2017; Gough, 2013). The current study supports the aesthetic role of muscularity, but also advances the knowledge of the diverse, underlying, and instrumental meanings muscularity holds for some men (e.g., hard work, control, and dedication). The current findings also suggest that it is not simply the possession of muscular bodily capital that is important, but the act of developing it is also a symbolic resource for enacting masculinity, which could help provide a contextual understanding of excessive and obsessive relationships with lifting weights (e.g., Murray, Rieger, & Touyz, 2011; Murray, Maguire, Russel, & Touyz, 2012).

Finally, the importance of social interactions and life-course observations in the current narratives supports the concept that muscular masculinity may be context dependent and that multiple masculine performances may be represented in modern society (de Visser et al., 2009; de Visser & McDonnell, 2013; Gough, 2013). The current findings reflect Bourdieu's (1986) proposal that an individual's habitus (e.g., masculine attitudes) and capital (e.g., muscularity; aesthetic and instrumental) is reinforced and validated within a specific field (e.g., sport and the gym), which guides acceptable practices (e.g., injury response). The current findings inform future research of the potential value in exploring different sociocultural fields and the personal stories of those who inhabit them.

Overall, the current study informs future research of the need to embrace diversity in, and socially dependent nature of, men's muscular masculinity. Similarly, the current findings suggest that there is more to muscular desires than just visual aesthetics and that there is a mutual link between the

aesthetic and instrumental functions of muscularity. Additionally, it informs rehabilitative professionals of the need to consider masculine narratives, normalise the injury process, and support and configure injury experiences that align with the individuals overarching narratives, values, and attitudes.

5. Limitations

The current narratives may be some of many and represent the socially constructed nature, diversity, and complexity of muscular desires. The findings, however, do inspire future exploration of other men's muscular desires and narratives. Additionally, when exploring muscularity and bodily concerns and desires, especially in men, the issue of emotional integrity may limit the findings. Traditional societal views may restrict people's willingness to share their feelings and desires through a fear of being judged or marginalised, which could encourage them to withhold or exaggerate information and experiences (Shepard & Rickard, 2012). The historical engagement and rapport with the current individuals, however, helped build trusting relationships, which reduced the fear of judgement.

A lack of researcher objectivity was also a potential limitation in that an involvement in timeline and interview discussions may have unintentionally influenced responses or behaviours. The aim of narrative analysis focuses on subjective, multiple, realities and the social co-construction of stories (Papathomas, 2016). Co-construction, therefore, was potentially beneficial in capturing the current individuals' stories and perception.

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Table 1. Participant demographic information.

Participant	Age ^a	Sport/Activity	Training Frequency (days per week)	Occupation
Darren	30	Obstacle Racing	4	Graphic Designer
Jack	19	Weightlifting	7	Gym Instructor
Josh	26	Weightlifting	6	Nutritional Advisor
Dale	31	Weightlifting	5	Butcher
Sean	29	Rugby Union	6	Teacher
Malcom	29	Soccer	5	IT Worker
Dennis	27	Rugby League	4	Insurance Advisor
Andy	21	Rugby Union	6	Personal Trainer
Craig	28	Rugby Union	5	Finance
Matt	40	Weightlifting	6	Plasterer

Table 2

Chosen qualitative research credibility criteria and actions taken in the life history study.

Aim	Criteria	Action
Contribute to the understanding of social life.	Substantive contribution	Identified the novel relationship between muscularity, masculinity, and injury, and applied an in-depth, rich, narrative approach to explore this area which is lacking in the current literature.
To have an emotional and intellectual impact on readers.	Impact	Present an understanding of the lives of the participants; stimulating readers' emotions and generating new questions.
To present comprehensive evidence for interpretations.	Width	Provided sufficient quotations, and story extracts to support the theoretical interpretations. Made models data etc. publicly available.
To create a complete and meaningful picture for readers.	Coherence	Created a structured, flowing, and informed representation of events; building narrative plots intertwined with theory.
To leave a lasting impression on readers.	Resonance	Presented experiences and emotions that translated into the lives of readers; stimulating sympathetic and empathetic emotions.
Represent the experiences of the participants.	Credibility	Sought participant reflection and using the already established relationship with, and understanding of, the participants.
To gain critical feedback and employ a transparent research process.	Transparency	Peer reflections and debriefing, and scrutiny from individuals outside of the research team was gained. For example, other therapists, and an English language expert reviewed the study to offer critical feedback, suggestions, and ideas on the credibility, utility, potential benefits, and flow.

RUNNING HEAD: OH TAKE SOME MAN-UP PILLS